

New Hope for Palestinian Refugee Women in Lebanon



Hana Jaraman, a student who was awarded a scholarship. (Photo courtesy of S. Faramarzi)

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Scheherezade Faramarzi

"Studying was always my dream — to finish school and go to university."

These are the words of Nesreen Abou Ardineh, a Palestinian living in Lebanon who is in her second year of a five-year engineering course. She's hoping to specialize in computer science — a subject many people believe is proper only for men. "People kept telling me that engineering is too tough for girls," she says. "Even my English teacher said girls cannot handle it."

"I didn't want to marry and stay at home and lead a routine life," she continues. Abou Ardineh is the youngest daughter in a six-child family. Her 55-year-old father, a plumber, has been unemployed for five years. Her brother, Issam, 30, is the family's only breadwinner. He brings home CA\$783 a month from his work as an electrician.

"At first, my family was surprised when I said I want to continue my education because I was the first girl to do so. No one has entered university in my family. They believe that when a girl reaches a certain age she ought to marry. I want to prove to them that there is something more important in life than marriage."

"I can marry when I get my degree and become an engineer. Marriage can wait, but this opportunity cannot. It's an opportunity of a lifetime."

A scholarship fund for women

About Ardineh's opportunity is a scholarship she was awarded from the [Scholarship Fund for Palestinian Refugee Women in Lebanon](#). This project is supported by the State of Qatar, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the OPEC Fund for International Development, and the governments of Spain, the United States, and France. The fund is aimed at refugee Palestinian female students wishing to attend an accredited Lebanese university.

Students are selected by an advisory committee, chaired by the chief of the Field Education Program of the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East \(UNRWA\)](#). The committee is made up of three UNRWA officials as well as four Palestinian representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A board of governors comprised of representatives from donor countries reviews the project's progress. IDRC is responsible for coordinating and managing the project. The advisory committee also submits its recommendations for scholarship candidates to IDRC before the final selection.

"You need to have at least a score of 60 in your Baccalaureate exam, come from a poor background, be a resident of Lebanon, and have acceptance from an accredited university in Lebanon in order to qualify," explains UNRWA's Jihad Marouf, who is responsible for receiving all initial applications to the fund.

A high demand

In fact, during September, the recruitment month for the scholarship, Marouf's office is continually crammed with teenaged women and their mothers. His phone rings nonstop, applications cover his desk, and he deals with countless tearful pleas. He receives about 25 applications a day, but says only 40 or 50 applicants are short-listed. Between 25 to 35 students are selected each year for scholarships. [See related sidebar: [From Application to Acceptance](#)]

"The demands are bigger than the fund," explains Sukaina Salameh, a committee member. "So we select the neediest of the needy."

But how do they determine who is the most needy?

"There should at least be evidence of economic need in terms of the income of the family," says Afaf Younis, Chief, Field Education Program at UNRWA. "If someone earns one million pounds [CA\$1,070] and has six kids, they're considered poor. We consider the status of the family, the status of the house — whether they rent a house or own it — what is the number of people in the family, who works and who doesn't work."

Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon

UNRWA's Special Hardship Program in Lebanon serves as a barometer for the socio-economic conditions in which Palestinian refugees live. In 2000, UNRWA registered 10.7% of all the 300,000 registered Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as "special hardship cases" — cases where people are unable to meet their basic needs for food and shelter. This level is the highest in all of UNRWA's fields of operation.

In addition to the 300,000 registered refugees, 42,000 unregistered Palestinians live in Lebanon. About 22,000 of them trace their exile to the 1967 war, thus falling outside the UNRWA refugee definition. Another 20,000 are considered to be of Lebanese origin, but identify themselves as Palestinians.

The unemployment rate among Palestinians in Lebanon is as high as 40% and many Palestinians live in poverty. Consequently, the level of education among Palestinians has dropped considerably. Families are unable to afford to send their children to universities. So it comes as no surprise that the scholarship fund project is met with great appreciation in the Palestinian community in Lebanon.

"Higher education for Palestinians is a need. Otherwise, what do we have?" says Qassem Aina, a committee member. "We have education," he adds. "Our education is our resource."

A source of hope

One student that committee members like to boast as a success story is Hana Jaraman — who at 27, is in her third year of math at Beirut Arab University (BAU). Hana is so cheerful and appreciative of the scholarship fund for realizing her dream of studying that she doesn't stop grinning when she talks about her experience. Hana quit school and married when she was 17. She divorced six years later. As soon as she heard about the scholarship fund, she applied. She was accepted.

"Wow! I didn't believe it!" she says, laughing. "When I divorced, the world seemed so bleak. I didn't have a [high school] diploma; I was dreaming of just going to high school. University was the farthest dream. My parents could not help me financially [to go to school]. I have one brother. My family could only pay for my brother's education."

"Here, it's more expected of men — they have to provide for the family, therefore priority is given to them." The fund, she says, realized her biggest dream. "It was as though the fairy godmother came and told me to make a wish and I did."

"Thank God for the fund which was most timely, otherwise I had no chance to go to university," says Nadine Diab, 20, who is in her third year studying physics at BAU. "I couldn't have even afforded to pay for the entrance exam."

Diab was receiving CA\$6,427 a year from the fund. But she has done so well that her university has awarded her its own scholarship. Diab's fund money has therefore been reallocated to another student.

Avoiding *wasta*

Many committee members laud the fund for not allowing *wasta* — connections that could be used to influence the selection of applicants. That is why the members decided not to make their names public; they don't want families to put pressure on them to select their daughters. "The culture here is dependent on a lot of *wasta*," says Samar Yassir, a committee member.

It's a pressure that Marouf knows only too well.

As soon as 17-year-old Rasha El-Achouah and her mother, from the Bourj el-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp, walk into his office, the mother asks him if he remembers her from the past when they worked together. Marouf apologizes for not remembering the woman and continues to take notes on an application form. The office boy quietly tells him that the girl is his niece and would he do whatever he can to help her?

El-Achouah's problem is that she obtained only 57% in her BACC II — three points below the criterion to qualify. But she has been accepted at BAU to study engineering.

"Engineering is very expensive," her mother pleads with Marouf. "Would you want her to change her course because of that?"

"I know you can help us," she adds, assertively.

Marouf only shakes his head and continues to write. Then, turning to me, he says: "This fund doesn't solve everyone's problem. It only solves part of the problem."

The reaction of boys

The only criticism voiced about the fund is that boys are excluded.

According to Diab and some other female students, after UNRWA publicized the scholarship fund in the refugee camps two years ago, many boys, resentful of being excluded, scorned the young women.

"Despite your degrees you will still end up in front of the kitchen sink," were some of the comments they made to the young women who won scholarships.

However, all the young women are grateful.

"The scholarship fund gave girls the ability to speak and express themselves," according to Abou Aridineh.

"My whole life style has changed," says Diab. "It is no longer limited to the community."

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Sidebar

From Application to Acceptance

When Nesreen Bedaywi, 18, applied to the fund, she traveled to Beirut by bus with her mother from the Bass Palestinian refugee camp in the southern port city of Tyre. Even though she acquired the minimum score to qualify, Bedaywi was worried. "I got 62, but I am afraid you will take those with higher average," she told Marouf, tears welling in her eyes.

For Bedaywi, education provided hope she could help lift her family from poverty. Her father, paralyzed in the right arm, makes about 300,000 Lebanese Pounds a month [about CA\$300] fixing radios and television sets. Bedaywi, the oldest of five children, wants to study biology and support the family when she becomes a teacher.

In fact, she was selected and awarded a scholarship.

"My father called me to say that I had been accepted. I asked him five times if he was sure. He said yes, congratulations. I still didn't believe it."

"The next day, I went to the UNRWA office and only believed it when I saw my name on the list of the selected students"

"I ran to my friends to tell them the news. It was the first time in my life that I had been so happy."

Bedaywi is now studying science at the Beirut Arab University.